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ROBERT.K. MERTON: A PARADIGM FOR FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS IN SOCIOLOGY

(July 4, 1910 – February 23, 2003)

Abstract

Since its coming during the 1940s, Functionalism has been the centre of major sociological attention. It emerged as the most dominant sociological theory, especially in the United States, in the 1950s and 1960s. Talcott Parsons led the way to develop a view of society which is rested on the principle of a shared normative order. Robert .K. Merton's intervention definitely extended the life of functionalism, with the introduction of some valid new concepts.

INTRODUCTION: Robert Merton was born in Philadelphia on 4th July 1910, son of poor immigrants from Eastern Europe. In the only sketch of his personal life he allowed himself (in his Charles Homer Haskins Lecture of 1994), he looked back on what he regarded as his rather in auspicious start 'in the slums of Philadelphia'. But he gratefully acknowledged that, although he lacked monetary capital, other kinds-social and cultural-were available to him through the first rate public institutions in the city at that time, such as his High School, the Carnegie Library near his home, the Academy of Music, and the Museum of Art. They gave him the opportunity from earliest years to let his ever curious mind grow, to broaden his horizon, and to develop his tastes. Indeed, his rise from those beginnings to his extraordinarily fruitful career is a worthy case study of the possibilities of success in America, given favorable internal and external circumstances.

Awarded a scholarship to attend Philadelphia's Temple University, he was recruited as a research assistant by George E. Simpson. The project was called "The Negro in the Philadelphia Press". It was his introduction to empirical social research in the form of content analysis. Having earned a bachelor's degree in Philosophy and Sociology in 1931, young Merton found it difficult to see where to go next during those years of the Great Depression. But as a result of a serendipitous encounter with the formidable chair of Harvard University's Department of Sociology, Pitrim Alexandrovich Sorokin, he applied there for his graduate study. A fellowship made it possible to go for his doctorate. Among his teachers was Talcott Parsons. He had just started to build and lecture on his overarching theory, and it soon resulted in his book 'The Structure of Social Action' (1949).

Robert Merton made huge strides in the sociological world with his notable publications of which 'Social Theory and Social Structure' (1949), 'The Sociology of Science' (1973), 'Sociological Ambivalence' (1976), 'On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandea Postscript' (1985) are particularly useful. Merton also developed some important concepts like 'Self Fulfilling Prophecy', 'Role

Model', 'Deviant Behavior' and 'Focus Group' to name a few. And his major theories include 'The Middle Range Theory', 'Latent and Manifest Functions', 'Dysfunctions' and "Deviance Typology'.

PARSONIAN-MERTON SOCIOLOGY: Functionalism came as an alternative to Marxian Theory. Marxian Theory was criticized as an 'economic deterministic approach' (Ritzer 2011: 229) but Functional theory evolved into a new kind of deterministic approach. When Marxian theory talks about the inevitability of conflict, functionalism glorifies functional integration; thus old determinism is replaced by new determinism. Merton makes an attempt to liberate sociology from the bondage of this determinism. He brings in novelty into sociological imagination and evolving a realistic sociology that was absolutely missing out both in the writings of Talcott Parsons and Karl Marx.

Talcott Parsons is considered as the undisputed leader of Functionalism who dominated the world of sociology, especially the American sociology since the publication of his *The Structure of Social Action* in 1937 (Kundu 2012: 95). As one of the most prominent theorists of his time Parsons inspired a whole range of his students. The most prominent was Robert King Merton, who reflected upon Parson's theory and advanced it further.

As a functionalist, R.K. Merton's credit goes as one who could critique T. Parsons and the orthodox versions of functionalism but still could advance on improved version of functionalism. According to Parsons, every change is a continuous process which is not arbitrary, where each part affects the other. It is a deliberate change affecting social life and which is harmonic in nature. Merton looks at society differently from the standpoint of Parsons indicating that the major problem with Parsonian Sociology is the fact that it is over committed to the question of Integration; something which cannot be guaranteed in social life.

The non-empirical propositions based on the abstract, theoretical systems, according to Merton, had led that all systems have needs and requisites that must be met and that certain structures are indispensable in meeting those ends (influenced by Talcott Parsons' theory of Social System). In order to modify and qualify the functionalist heritage Merton pointed out that the orthodox version rested on three postulates which need to be reassessed (Merton 1949), which will be dealt with later in this paper.

THEORIES OF THE MIDDLE RANGE (1949): Just as Talcott Parsons was beginning to embrace a form of requisite functionalism, Robert Merton launched a critique of Parsons' functional strategy for building sociological theory. To him, Parsons searched for a "*total system of sociological theory, in which observation about every aspect of social behavior, organization, and change promptly find their preordained place, has the same exhilarating challenge and the same small promise as those many all-encompassing philosophical systems which have fallen into deserved disuse*" (Coser 1975: 45).

For Merton, such Grand Theoretical Schemes are premature since the theoretical and empirical groundwork necessary for their completion has not been performed. In Merton's view, theories of the Middle Range offer more theoretical promise than Parsons' Grand Theory. They are couched at the lower level of abstraction and reveal clearly defined and operationalized concepts that are incorporated into statements of covariance for a limited range of phenomena.

What really needs to be understood here is the need to understand what the middle range theories add, with regards to sociology, the ability to waddle away the big abstract picture of society that doesn't allow us to do any kind of concrete research. 'Middle range theories brings our focus down to a more manageable level and it allows us to make more educated guesses; hypothesis which can be empirically tested' (Turner 2001: 88). This could be accomplished by acknowledging the bearing of theory on research and vice-versa.

Middle Range theories deal with 'delimited aspects of social phenomena, as is indicated by their labels. One speaks of a theory of reference groups, of social mobility, or role-conflict and of the formation of social norms just as one speaks of a theory of prices, a germ theory of disease, or a kinetic theory of gases' (Merton 1949: 39).

'Illustrating with the theory of *'Role Set'*¹, Merton showed that broad theoretical orientation of great classicists, be it Marx, Sorokin or Parsons, cannot adequately account for such' (Kimmel 2007: 533-34). For him, systems of sociological thought, although, are projected as logically close-knit and mutually exclusive sets of doctrine but comprehensive sociological theories are actually sufficiently loose-knit and internally diversified. Only Middle Range theories with a measure of empirical conformation are better suited as comprehensive theories.

MERTON'S LATENT AND MANIFEST FUNCTION (1957): Modern Sociological Theory has been profoundly influenced by functional analysis which became enormously popular at the turn of the century. During the last two generation, functional analysis became the principle, if not the only reigning paradigm of contemporary sociology with more adherents than any other mode of sociological analysis or school of thought. It has given Sociology a new and powerful explicative paradigm of society unmatched yet, by any other completing mode of sociological thinking. According to Adams and Sydie (2001), Functional analysis is not new; it has a long history in both the cultural and social sciences. It borrowed heavily from biological sciences especially the extensions of the many analogies between society and organism. Functionalism as a school of thought is simply a view of society as a self-regulating system of interconnected elements (structure-function) with structured social relationships and observed regularities.

Merton outlines the major points of his paradigm for functional research and analyzes the state of functionalism at that time. He was especially critical of the functionalism that grew out of anthropology. Merton also addresses the problem of the confusion of terms as it relates to the functional approach in sociology. Merton states that ***"too often a single term has been used to symbolize different concepts, just as the same concept has been symbolized by different terms. Clarity of analysis and adequacy of communication are both victims of this frivolous use of words"*** (Merton 1949: 22). Merton offers evidence to support his contention by pointing out that there are, at least, five definitions of function used in sociology and in common usage. It can mean

¹ Role-set differs from what sociologists have long described as "multiple roles"-referring not to the complex roles associated with a single social status but to various social statuses (see ed. Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff and Virk 2012: 533-534).

a social event, occupation, "duties assigned to the incumbent of a social status" or "a variable considered in relation to one or more variables in terms of which its own value depends". The fifth and last definition of function is the one that is most appropriate to this study. It stems from the mathematical definition, but is more explicitly adapted from the biological sciences, where the term function "is understood to refer to the vital organic processes considered in the respects in which they contribute to the maintenance of the organism". Merton clarifies this point in discussing Radcliffe-Brown's conception of social function. Merton states:

After the fashion of Durkheim, he (Radcliffe-Brown) asserts that "the function of a recurrent physiological process is thus a correspondence between it and the needs... of the organism." And in the social sphere where individual human beings, "the essential units", are connected by networks of social relations into an integrated whole, "the function of any recurrent activity ... is the part it plays in the social life as a whole and therefore the contribution it makes to the maintenance of the structural continuity (Merton 1968: 23-24).

Merton delineates **three basic postulates** that functionalist have postulated. For the most part they come from the anthropological school and, according to Merton, have served to restrict empirical studies of a functional nature. The first postulate is that cultural items are functional for the entire social or cultural system. Radcliffe Brown (1935) states:

'The function of a particular social usage is the contribution it makes to the total social life as the functioning of the total social system. Such a view implies that a social system (the total social structure of a society together with the totality of social usages) in which that structure appears and on which it depends for its continued existence, has a certain kind of unity, which we may speak of as a functional unity. We may define it as a condition in which all parts of the social system work together with a sufficient degree of harmony or internal consistency, i. e., without producing persistent conflicts which can neither be resolved nor regulated' (Radcliffe-Brown 1935: 397).

Merton points out that an item that is functional for one group might, in some cases, be dysfunctional for other groups within the same society. Merton asserts that anthropologists "often cite 'increased solidarity of the community' and 'increased family pride' as instances of functionally adaptive sentiments". Yet, as Merton points out, an increase in pride among individual families often serves to disrupt the solidarity of a small community. Merton explains this assumption of functional unity among anthropologists as coming from the fact that, for the most part, the cultures studied were pre-literate and not "large, complex and highly differentiated literate societies" (Merton 1968: 22-25).

Merton uses religion as an example and states:

Deriving from the Durkheim orientation which was based largely upon the study of non literate societies , these authors tend to single out only the apparently integrative consequences of religion and to neglect its possibly disintegrative consequences. (Merton 1968: 30)

The second postulate is that all standardized social or cultural forms have positive functions. Some theorists, such as Kluckhohn, attach functions to items that appear to be non-functional. Kluckhohn (1944) states:

That present mechanically useless buttons on the sleeve of a European man's suit sub serve the "function" of preserving the familiar, of maintaining a tradition. People are, in general, more comfortable if they feel themselves as following out the orthodox and socially approved forms of behavior.

Merton points out that this type of hypothesis "falls back upon a type of function which would be found, by definition rather than by inquiry" (Merton 1968: 32). Merton further clarifies his position when he states:

This universal functionalism may or may not be a heuristic postulate; that remains to be seen. But one should be prepared to find that it diverts critical attention from a range of non-functional but theoretically and practically important consequences of existing cultural forms (Merton 1968: 32).

The third postulate of functionalism is functional indispensability. Merton counters this by stating that "just as the same item may have multiple functions, so may the same function be, diversely fulfilled by alterative items" (Merton 1968: 35)

Merton's path-breaking article of 1949 which was later republished in 1957 and 1968, 'Manifest and Latent Functions' not only pinpointed a number of difficult issues in anthropological functionalism but also anticipated much of Parsons' important work from the 1950s. In order to produce a satisfactory statement of functional analysis, Merton proposed a distinction between *manifest and latent functions*. The former refers to 'the conscious intentions of actors; the latter refers to the unintended objective consequences of their actions' (Harrington 2005: 90).

This distinction addresses the problem of distinguishing between the cases in which the subjective aim-in-view coincides with the objective consequences, and the case in which they diverge. Such an analytical distinction is related to Merton's contention of unanticipated consequences. One may do things which are aimed at some goal but end up achieving something else. For a sociologist studying the intended consequences are far easy, but the challenge is more in identifying those which are unintended and where mostly the actors are unaware of. The distinction between latent and manifest function helps the sociologist to make his/her presence felt as a critical analyst. Once the researcher is aware of the notion of latent functions, he/she would not be easily tempted to regard everything that does not have an immediate, manifest function as simply 'irrational'. Merton gives us the example of the '*Hopi Indians*'² who, in times of drought, gather to perform a ritual dance with the professed intention of magically causing rain (manifest function); whether the ritual brings rain or not, it does promote a general feeling of solidarity (latent function).

It is important to note that 'one social fact can have negative consequences for another social fact' (Ritzer 2011: 245-46). To rectify this serious omission in early structural functionalism, Merton developed the idea of a '**Dysfunction**'. For example, according to Ritzer (2011) slavery in the Southern United States of America clearly positive consequences for the Whites, such as supplying cheap labor, support for the cotton economy and social status; but it also had negative consequences in the sense that the Whites were too dependent on an agrarian economy and

² Primarily living on a 1.2 million acre reservation in north-eastern Arizona, the Hopi(peaceful ones) have the longest authenticated history of occupation of a single area by any Native American tribe in the United States.

therefore unprepared for industrialization. These distinctions between ‘Manifest and Latent Functions’ and ‘Function and Dysfunction’ developed by Merton have made Functional Analysis of Social Change and Cultural patterns both scientific and meaningful.

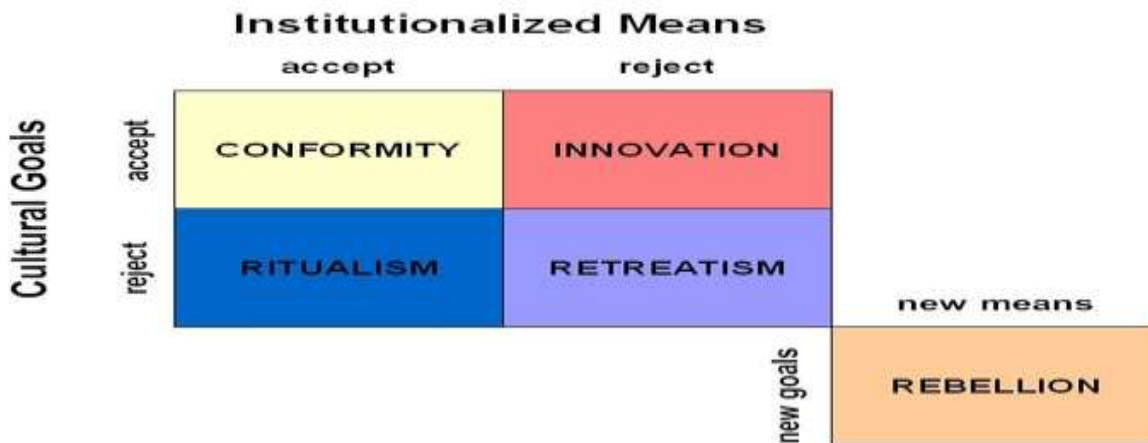
SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND ANOMIE: ‘One of the best-known contributions to structural functionalism, indeed all of sociology (Adler and Laufer 1995; Menard 1995) is Merton’s (1968) analysis of the relationship between culture, structure and anomie’. Anomie occurs “when there is an acute disjunction between the cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with them” (Merton 1968: 216). This dichotomy mostly leads to manifestation of criminal behavior, therefore the deviance is present in all societies; and deviance itself may have functional, dysfunctional or ‘non-functional roles to play’.³

This Theory of Deviance comes as an extension to Emile Durkheim’s Theory of Anomie. According to Durkheim, in his influential publication on Suicide (1897) ‘*anomie arises more generally from a mismatch between personal or group standards and wider social standards, or from the lack of a social ethic, which produces moral deregulation and an absence of legitimate aspirations. This is a nurtured condition*’. Merton challenges Durkheim’s views by saying that anomie is not a product of social change; anomie is a normal condition present in every society. Since social life tries to create space, goals of individuals are not accomplished, norms are thus not identically internalised.

For example, in American society, the culture places great emphasis on material success. However, by their position within the social structure, many people are prevented from achieving such success. If one is born into the lower socio-economic class, the chances of achieving economic success are slim or non-existent. Under such circumstances, anomie can be said to exist, and as a result, there is a tendency toward deviant behavior. In this context, ‘deviance often takes the form of alternative, unacceptable, and sometimes illegal means of achieving economic success’ (Ritzer 2011: 249-50).

³ Non-functions are consequences that are simply irrelevant to the system under consideration. Included here might be social forms that are “survivals” from the earlier historical times (see Ritzer 2011: 246)

Robert K. Merton's Deviance Typology



This kind of typology is often used in criminology and it also helps explain human behavior that usually does not satisfy the norms laid down by the society. Merton's Deviant typology tends to be more on the micro side of the fence; and it is a functional theory because it tries to explain again those functions and dysfunctions with regard to the concept of deviance in society.

Merton in his Theory of Deviance, develops different types of individuals or groups who encompass deviant or non-deviant behavior; and he points out that, realistically, deviant behavior depends on two criteria: it depends on whether or not one accepts the 'institutionalized means' and the 'cultural goals' set forth by society. Based on those criteria, Merton highlights the following typology:

1. **Conformist:** Those individuals who accept both the institutionalized means and the cultural goals put forward by the society. He however, identifies four (4) other groups of individuals who either reject the means or the goals or reject both the means and the goals; and he labels these groups. This is where Middle Range Theories are particularly helpful to the researcher. It not only scales down the level of analysis so that it is more manageable and visible; it also helps us make sense of it and classify things.
2. **Ritualist:** Individuals or groups belonging to this type accept the institutionalized means but reject the cultural goals. These are individuals who are satisfied with what the society has to offer and place no ultimate goal(s) to achieve.
3. **Innovators:** Individuals or groups belonging to this type reject the institutionalized means but accept the cultural goals. These are groups of people who place various goals to achieve but do not adhere to the means set forth by society in order to achieve those goals.
4. **Retreatist:** Individuals or groups who reject both the institutionalized means and the cultural goals. These are people who possess no goal(s) to achieve whatsoever and place no importance to the means either.
5. **Rebellion:** Individuals or groups who not only reject both the institutionalized means and the cultural goals, but also try to replace the whole social structure of society with a new one. A structure where they place their own means and goals. These are people who are not satisfied with the system and thus tries to replace a new system where they deem fit.

One can see that Merton can take this typology and create a research project that is applicable to society. How could we use its application? Let's say we decide we want to use the above typology to look at a particular community or tribe, could we say that most people in that particular community or tribe fit into one of these groups? We absolutely could but this also highlights one of the drawbacks or problem areas of Merton's typology; in that not every single individual is going to 'fit in' in one of the above categories, in other words, not everybody's motivation is the same as Merton would describe in this theory.

Critical Appraisal: An oft-repeated criticism of functionalism is that it is teleological. Function is often equated with purpose and the existence of any social form or cultural usage is readily attributed to its function. The common assumption, according to Francis Abraham (1982), in functional analysis that the contribution an element makes to society is the society's maintenance or self-preservation is, as Spencer observes, 'frankly teleological. It argues that the purpose of society is its own preservation'. To equate function with purpose or cause leads to other misleading assumptions as well.

Critics have charged that 'functionalism is speculative as a theory and untestable as a deductive system. They argue that it is only a conceptual frame of reference built around numerous principles and assumptions with a regrettable lack of any data base'(Abraham 1982: 94). A major difficulty with functional analysis is the ambiguity of the concepts like function, integration, etc which are used inconsistently and as often without clear definition. The use of a single term to cover several distinctly different referents has caused confusion and disagreement even among outstanding functionalists. Although Merton has done much to clarify the most important concepts, the terminological confusion still persists.

Merton consistently underplayed Conflict and Structural Strain. Even when he referred to conflicts, he treated them as 'deviance'. According to Mark Abrahamson, 'this sort of shortcomings results from looking at the social structure as the static "backbone" of society and considering structural analysis in social science as analogous to anatomy or morphology in biology'(Abrahamson 1978: 6).

Merton has gone to great lengths to defend functional analysis against the charge of ideological bias which, according to him, is not all inherent in it. If some have accused functionalism of conservative bias, others have accused it of radical bias. Merton insists 'functional analysis is neutral to the major ideological systems' and it is the particular functionalists who inject implicit valuations into their modes of inquiry.

According to Francis Abraham (1982), the methodology of functionalism tends to be weak, for it rests on intuition or the ability of the observer to see or detect functions performed by particular elements. Sometimes the function of a particular social form or cultural item seems to be an invention of the observer, especially if it is a 'latent function' which is neither intended nor recognised by the actor (Abraham 1982: 99). Does the ritual of Rain Dance really function to enhance group solidarity among the Hopi Indians? Or Does religion really promote social integration and relieve tension? Is it not also possible to argue the observer with reference to its

various dysfunctions? Thus the recognition of functions often depends on the perception and even imagination of the observer, and not on scientific testimony. Nevertheless, functional analysis has been a very effective counter to many a social phenomena and social change studies.

While he clearly thought that a general sociological theory was pre-mature, Merton did not consider its eventual achievement impossible in principle. Despite his professed allegiance to middle-range theories, his writings, as Arthur Stinchcombe and others have pointed out, do contain elements that point to a grand sociological theory. Not only his conceptualization of social structure itself, but also some of his concepts, such as unanticipated consequences of social action, role-set and status-set, appear to be of such generality that they would very likely play a part in any future grand theory of sociology.

In "Theories of the Middle Range," Robert Merton wrote, "Perhaps sociology is not yet ready for its Einstein because it has not yet found its Kepler." While Merton's field is still awaiting its Einstein, it may well have had the privilege of experiencing its Kepler.

CONCLUSION: Merton suggests that sociologists must be methodologically wise, they must be aware of the design of investigation, the nature of inference, and the requirements of a theoretical system. In his central thesis, the empirical research goes beyond the passive role of verifying and testing theory; it does more than just confirm or refute hypotheses. Merton's work on functionalism is extremely important because of the framework it provides for later functionalists. In addition, it moved functionalism away from dealing with only the positive and intended functions of an item and into an area more adapted to the study of the consequences of an item on the social structure. We may conclude with Nicholas Timasheff, "functionalism is perhaps more promise than achievement, but it is an important promise (Timasheff 1967: 228).

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